



PROJECT MUSE®

Exploring Desert Stone

Steven K. Madsen

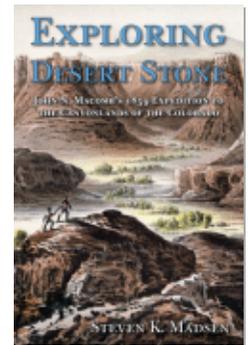
Published by Utah State University Press

Madsen, Steven K.

Exploring Desert Stone: John N. Macomb's 1859 Expedition to the Canyonlands of the Colorado.

Utah State University Press, 2010.

Project MUSE.muse.jhu.edu/book/9852.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9852>



1859 LETTERS OF JOHN N. MACOMB, JR.,
TO HIS WIFE,
ANN MINERVA “NANNIE” RODGERS MACOMB

Macomb used his correspondence in part to create his summary report of the expedition. Fortunately, his wife Nannie saved the letters. It appears that she subsequently donated the collection to the Library of Congress.

I have removed most of Macomb’s personal comments, unrelated to the expedition, from the following letters.

* * *

Santa Fé, N. M. 4th June 1859.

My dear Wife,

....I am just beginning now my preparations for the summer’s work—that is as well as I can in the absence of pretty much everybody on whom I depend for Carrying out my orders. The Commander of the Department has been absent from here for the last four weeks—and I suppose when he returns I shall not find in him a very zealous co-adju[s]tor in regard to my campaign for it just breaks up one which he was preparing, and in which he expected to employ me, in view of the fact that my road business was about drawing to a close. To day our mail which left Independence in the middle of May, is due & I suppose that my assistants will be the passengers filling the coach—they certainly will fill it if they all came and bring with them the requisite articles for their summer’s campaign, and the various

From the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

instruments that were to be sent out by them. This is just the time for me to congratulate you on having had the patience to remain at home; for if you were here, it would at once become a very serious question as to how you should take care of yourself and the bairns in my absence; and I should be leaving Santa Fé with a heavy heart in consequence—whereas now I can leave here, with the regret to be sure that I am for the time cut off from the receipt of your letters; but at the same time with the comfortable and comforting assurance that you and ours are as well established as possible under the circumstances—& infinitely better off than you could possibly be at any point west of the Mississippi river!

Well the stage came in about noon and I have seen and conversed with Dr. Newberry and Mr. Dimmock—with both of whom I feel well pleased, and I trust that we shall go smoothly through the season and think none the worse of one another at the close up of it.—According to the experience of you and me we should on the contrary think all the better of one another—Should we not? I have received your beautiful picture and find it an exceedingly good likeness; but, as beautiful as it is, it cannot make me love you any more than I did, for you had already all of my poor heart, as I know that I have all of yours and oh! How happy and cheerful a consciousness of this State of the Case has kept me in the long and weary time and distance which separates us. How it cheers us both in the path of duty does it not? I trust that the remainder of the time will pass more rapidly than has any one of the long months gone by. But there is much to be done before I can fix upon a time for turning my head homewards. I can only say that before there was any contingency [named?] for me to work up to, that the duty out here was an up hill business; but I feel now as if I had reached the top and that road home leads over a pleasant descending slope, down which we can drive at a merry trot. I remember when I was down at Fort Craig that I had two lines, each of four miles long, to measure back into the country from the river bank and it seemed, at both of them, very slow work for the first two miles and the tallies accumulated but slowly; but after passing the middle point how quickly did we attain the goal. Thus in life itself how long did seem those days and weeks of childhood! Happy though they were. My memory is chiefly with the pleasant scenes and incidents of the past the child life, still, with gratitude do I say it, these delightful recollections constitute but a small item in my present happiness when I think of my darling wife and children at home.

.....

Hoping to hear from you in a week I remain your devotedly attached husband

J.N. Macomb

Sunday afternoon 5 P.M. A small Mexican Vagabond, one of my pet beggars, has just brought in a few bruised rose leaves which after the fashion of the Country, he dignifies as "Rosas de la Castilla!" I place them with Gus' [Agustus Macomb's] dry flowers for the sake of their sweet parfum. Adios.

* * *

Santa Fé, 19th June 1859.

My dear Wife,

...I suppose you think I am a long time in Santa Fé—the truth is I never saw a place where in it is so difficult to get what is required for one of these mountain trips. I have to be sure an order (a most liberal order) upon the Department to sell to me such things as can be spared! And you may depend upon it that they can spare but little on such an order. The Quartermasters Dept., in wh. I relied to furnish me, at cost, with mules has none to spare so that I shall have to look around and buy them here and there. Ever since Capt. Marcy came through here 18 months ago and bought up all the spare stock animals have been scarce here. It is a mistake to suppose that any of the notices which preceded my order to organize this expedition, were of sufficient authority for me to act upon except as regards mere personal preparations, and I have been ready myself pretty much all the time. The important part of the duty is now going on briskly enough and the expedition can only last a certain length of time on account of the limited supply of money, by wh. entirely I am to govern my movements. By the above I mean to say that the expenditures were begun sometime since and at a pretty lively rate too and to judge by some of the appointments made for me—expenditure seems to have been the great end in view! I have just made an agreement with a man who is to purchase mules for me, and to pack them (not in salt) but to load and unload them and see that they are properly taken care of in the field &c &c. and now I think my preparations will go on swimmingly and that I shall be able to stat start quite as soon as the Commander of this Department can furnish me with the requisite escort.

I feel very much indebted to Major Sibley for his timely suggestions to the Secretary for without the homeward tendency of the expedition the whole thing would be utterly distasteful to me. I look upon all of this region, I have yet seen, as being worth less than the cost of examining it. I was glad to make roads through it because it is a desideratum for all that have to pass through the country, to do it in as quick time as possible. I cannot imagine that a large population can ever be sustained here—here it is the end of June and scarce anything growing yet! To day we have had the thermometer at 95° in the shade! It is so dry here this summer that

I think there will be a deal of suffering next winter for want of the usual scanty crops.

I expect to go out by way of Cañada and Abiquiu where I was working a road last summer. My first route is to be over a part of the old "Spanish trail," which I have heard very favourably spoken of in regard to supply of grass, water and fuel—I shall endeavour to avoid the dry Country that Mr. Ives fell into, or to visit it in the rainy season.

I shall miss exceedingly our regular communications every week; but the bright prospect of the Christmas dinner at home will I trust enable me to wait patiently for the good time in prospect.

...—I must not forget to thank you for that patent drinking cup—the kindly drops of the "water of life" it contained were seized upon and I have them in my pocket book to refer to occasionally in the field—where we can take but few books. The Art of travel too came duly to hand—I expect to trust my self in the hands care of experienced travellers of this country and to plod along absorbed with my Survey & astronomizing; and to practice but few arts of travel on my own account!

I feel much harrassed with the anxieties of the preparation to write a lively letter so I must say adieu my dear Wife. Ever your own

J.N.M.

* * *

Sunday evening 3d. July '59

My dear Wife,

This has been a day of interruptions with me—I wished to write to you at an early hour to day—and here are the shadows of evening again closing in upon me and the letter has dwindled down to this note!

As I was about to begin to day in came one of my pet beggars with a bunch of poor pea blossoms & I soon put him off, after duly caring for his pretty gift which is still blooming in my only glass tumbler, I soon made the poor boy's heart glad by the gift of the oldest pair of black pantaloons in this part of the country! Thus the last pair of my old cloth nethers have disappeared. Well I had no sooner seized the pen again than in came my hostler with "Captn. I cant get any waterhole to soak them raw hides in" well I told him to hold on and I would get the use of one—so my friend the Mayor Domo of the Obispo gave me the use of a small muddy pond in the corral of the palacio & in went our hides in the course of the day! but long before we could effect that cherished object various other interruptions occurred. Let me un-mystify you a little as to the important end of soaking rawhides. you see we are to have a lot of packing lines made to morrow out of these hides; & they must be softened over night before

they can be cut up! Well in came a man reporting himself to me as in charge of three six mule wagons from Major Rucker's, Qr. Ms. Depot, with all my provisions & camp equipage for the summer! These had to be received and stowed away at once! I have now some of my young gentlemen keeping guard over these stores and shall have until we can depart from this City for there is not a reliable lock in the Castle I have rented, on the other side of the Parroquia from my quarters, to keep these things in until the day of my departure from this City.

...I have fixed upon the 12th of July for my departure from Santa Fé for the interior whether we work up to it or not remains to be seen. There are some 20 mules and a few donkeys to be purchased yet—and the holders think that we want them more than they Do & charge for them accordingly. I have bought some 44 mules already & upwards of 6000 pounds of provisions so I feel as if I were really in business again—the fact is that the road work was a mere recreation & I think I grew somewhat lazy under it. I hope now that I am likely to be fully occupied I shall grow bright again!

There is no use of our counting upon any set time for our re-union[.] We must patiently and gratefully abide our time and continue to be thankful for our many blessings. I love you dearly but I must quit & retire so good night...

* * *

Santa Fé, 10th July '59

My dear Wife,

...You will be pleased to know that now I feel very much relieved—having in the last week finished up my quarterly accounts and my annual report on the road question—this last was something I felt I ought to do for the sake of the old roads over which I have travelled many a mile pleasantly. The fact is that with so much that is pleasant to think of at home I should be ungrateful to get along otherwise than pleasantly.

I could not help feeling rather overpowered tho' for a time in relation to the outfit for this exploration with but little prospect of discovering any thing worth knowing—but Dr. Newberry says the country must be explored & the Govt. ought to pay for the expense so I have given myself less anxiety on the subject of late and I feel now with my seventy mules & eight burros to say nothing of Donkeys, about as easy as I did with a single pair eighteen month[s] ago. I have fixed up[on] Tuesday 12th, day after [tomorrow] for leaving here—Wednes[day] of this week at further cost must see us clear of this town for a few months any how.

So after you get this little note you must make up your mind to get along without hearing from me for a long time. I shall ask my young

friend Rojer [*sic*] Jones to take care of my letters &c for me—in fact I have aske[d] him & he has promised to attend to it—as he is on duty here at the Hd. Qrs. Of the Department of New Mexico—he will be very sure to know of any chances of communicating with me.

I hope that you and the children will enjoy yourselves throughout the summer & re[turn] for the Winter to Washn. in [?] accustomed good health. I am sorry I did not hear from you by the last mail but I hope something may come by the next & that our messenger, whom we shall leave here for the purpose, will bring it along to Abiquiu the last settlement to the Northwest of this on our route.

I must say good night for sleep overcomes me.

God bless you all my dear wife and children[.] ever your own

John N.

* * *

Friday 5th August 1859.

My dear Wife,

Since my hurried note to you on the 25th ultimo, which perhaps will never reach you for it went from my camp on the upper ford of the Chama in a rainy time and was probably reconverted into pulp long before it could have reached the Post Office; well since then we have come on bravely—swimmingly I may say, for we have had much rain and have forded many noble streams. We have passed through a very interesting country, to me at least after my long residence in the bad region of Santa Fé, I find the sight of these green hills & flowing streams and fine pine trees a most refreshing sight. Since I was at Fort Stanton two years ago I have not seen such rains as we have had for the ten days we were in the mountains. We are now in clear weather again, and upon the whole find it rather pleasant than was the rainy time we passed through. For once I am obliged to give up my preference of mud for dust. For when we live upon the ground it is certainly more agreeable to step out of bed into the dry Dust rather than into the mud. I doubt if we get rain again for some time after the quantity that has fallen. I must now tell you where I am—Well my Latitude is 37° 13' N and Longt. about 108° 10' W. I suppose by our route some 220 miles to the N. W. of Santa Fé. Our whole party has enjoyed excellent health. Our mules, of which we have 69, and Burros of wh. 8, have enjoyed the fine mountain grass and gained strength & flesh upon the journey. But oh what a loss of time this sort of travelling seems. Always packing & unpacking. I only enumerated above my animals the escort has as many more. I am very well pleased at the fact of having my friend Mr. Cogswell along

in charge of the escort—You will remember his name as the one associated with mine in the Fort Stanton Surveys two years ago. We have messed together ever since I came into Santa Fé on the 27th May 1857, and I wish very much he could go with me into the states after our summers journey. We have seen and talked with many of the Utah Indians and they profess to be friendly. Still we keep a good look out upon our animals lest the temptation should prove too great for these sons of the forest to steal them.

We have just heard rumors of a fight between our soldiers & the mormons in the Salt Lake City—these rumors are brought by Indian traders who came into our camp yesterday on their return from the great rivers we expect to visit—the reports are so extravagant we can scarcely believe them—they speak of battering down houses & killing women & children—so unusual a course for us that I cannot credit the reports—yet the description of the effects of the great guns so accurately given by the Indian reporters would seem to give a color of truth to the story after all—for without witnessing such scenes the Indians could hardly contrive such a story—but you will know the truth about this matter before this can reach you.

We see many beautiful flowers on the way “flores de estada” a very few of which I inclose for the dear children[.] I have some, a few, others in press which I hope to bring to my Gus, as I wish to see him enjoying the sight and possession of them—You will observe that the inclosed are the same sort as those, or some of those, sent from Stanton.

I can only tell you that we are all well here and full of hope that the winter will find us at our homes. I hope you may continue in the blessings of health and happiness and peace and plenty and that I may find the little flock all well and blooming on my return. I feel so well that I often think I must be profiting by your prayers for my well being. ever your own devoted husband[.]

J. N. Macomb.

* * *

Santa Fé, N. M. 30th Sepr. 1859

My dear Wife,

You will rejoice with me that I am once more safely on the East Side of the Rio Bravo Grande del Norte! I reached Santa Fé on the day before yesterday having been absent just eleven weeks during all of which time I believe we were never very far from Water. I mention this first because it seemed to be among your chief fears that I would suffer with thirst—& to guard against this evil you had so ingeniously provided a sectional cup!

as if a cup were likely to be of much use where no water was! Well we had plenty of water, for where there was no water usually we were beautifully rained upon and thus spared all suffering in that score throughout our 77 days of absence.

You must be content to know that we had a delightful trip of it & all returned in good health & spirits. I am now surrounded by the luggage & am more or less disturbed by the process of packing and unpacking & occasional calls upon me for money &c to say nothing of my anxiety to sell the animals & other public property we have used on the expedition. So you must not expect any great things from me yet awhile. You will be pleased to know that my friends here gave me a warm welcome on my return and that I was greeted on my arrival by your two letters (last date 26th August) and a very nice letter from our niece Fanny who gave me good news of all our friends at & about Esperanza.

...I found my old quarters at the Bishop's palace just as I left them, with the exception that my attentive friend the french Major Domo had caused the room to be swept & had placed upon the table a beautiful bouquet of his own arranging so that the place is now fragrant with sweet flowers. This was a very pretty compliment on the part of my french friend and I shall ever remember it with pleasure.

This is Sunday evening 2nd October. Since I began this letter I have had a great deal to attend to & I may say I have attended to it, but I must now prepare to close this that it may go into the office before seven o'clock tomorrow morning. I found to day that I was shutting myself up rather too much so I started off for a walk this afternoon and called in on the way & took Capt. Wainwright & the children with me. We went up to old Fort Marcy which overlooks the town & the country for many miles to the South & West. Here we enjoyed the beautiful sunset and soon returned—this is a short walk; but as the height is about as great as that of the Castle where our friend Majr. Williams used to live is above the old “Dormitory,” the exercise is good to mount & ascend. It requires more of an effort to over come the same height here than it does at Mackinac.

I wish before leaving the country to make a visit to my friends at Albuquerque and I must try and do it this week; their kindness to me has known no bounds since I have been here. Well, my dear wife, I have been so long without writing that I am quite out of the way now—resting from this seems not to bring about the restorative effect which we find from our natural repose! I reckon the plain truth is that nothing ever could make a letter writer of me at all events. So I'll quit merely remarking that you may write a note to me & send it to the care of Captn Van Vliet at Fort Leavenworth[,] Kansas and I will ask him to keep anything that may come for me during my journey.

...I cannot tell yet exactly at what time my train will set out from Santa Fé, but I hope it will be before the middle of October.—I wonder if my friend Major Smith has found out where you are yet & if he has succeeded in seeing you. He is a nice man—raised in Norfolk, Va. He left here for the states when I started for the Wilds of Utah. I doubt if he will return to New Mexico & I trust I never shall. With love to all I remain your devoted husband[.]

J.N.M.

* * *

Santa Fé, N. M. 6th Octr. 1859.

My dear Wife,

...We are all agog here for the arrival of the mail which still lags behind although it was due 48 hours ago. Saturday 8th October. Well that mail from Independence is not yet here although due 4 days now, but I have just recd. your very welcome letter of the 9th of Sept. wh. although marked by you via Independence came by the overland & then from El Paso by our weekly Southern mail—so you see it is very quick after all—only 4 weeks from “Bailey’s”.

In regard to the mail by the Independence route we have as usual in Cases of detention various surmises as to the cause—we have pretty generally settled down upon the idea of high water in the arkansas river, as a friend of mine [Joab Houghton] has lately returned here from a visit to Pike’s Peak and on his return found very high water up on the Arkansas.

...This is a [lurid?] region I assure you & you can never find out the full extent of how they drink and gamble in this country till you see me again.

I have drawn my pay to the end of October, (for the last four months) and I hasten to send the chief part of it to you

...I am very busy now; but I will leave this open until Sunday night in case an idea should come along mean while.

Well here it is Monday night the 10th Oct. & the mail from Independence not yet arrived. This letter should have left here this morning but the mail did not go on acct. of the now arrival of the other one. We have just heard of the safe arrival at Fort Union of some ladies at Fort Union from Leavenworth. They came out under the escort of Major J. L. Donaldson & his wife & Col. Bonneville’s wife & daughter, make the party.

...Tuesday 11th. I have just finished packing up for a visit to Albuquerque and it is now but half past five o’clock; so you see if I get home this winter you may expect occasionally to hear the dulcet notes of the great waiter I used to beat the reveille upon three years ago. You will hear from me again—that is I will write before I set out upon my journey

homewards. With love to all I remain your ever devoted husband and lover JNM Oct [no?]

* * *

Sunday night 23d Oct. '59

My dear Wife,

I am that tired with packing up and preparing for the long journey before me that I can scarcely keep awake long enough to write you a little letter.

I have this day re[ceive]d. a Copy of the orders to my escorting Lieut. by wh. I learn that that officer will have 3 non commissioned officers & 35 men which with my own party will make up about 52 persons[,] So that I hope we shall be able to get through safely and expeditiously.

I expect a detention of not more than a week at the South West Corner of Kansas, where I am directed to do a small piece of work. I have bought two wagons and a Carriage (Jersey) to bring in my party & I expect besides to ride in the old vehicle I have used here ever since I came with power in this country.

This carriage riding is all very well when you can do it at the public expense; but I should have been obliged to stay sometime before I could have got a comfortable outfit at my own cost.

I have been around tonight to see some of my friends and to say adieu.

...I bought about \$300. worth of provisions for the trip for our party & I think I shall yet spend something more. My funds are getting low; but I hope to sell my animals & wagons for something at the other end of the route, and to come in out of debt. I suppose you must now be comfortably settled at 361 H street again.

I hope to leave here in the course of the next 48 hours and to go over to Fort Union where I shall be joined by my es escort. We have guns and pistols enough to make it very uncomfortable for the indians in case they should determine to attack us; but I hope we may go as quietly through the country as it has thus far been my good fortune to do.

Well I must say good night.

Ever your own devoted husband.

...Well again I say goodnight, with love to you all at home.